The role of speakers and listeners in
Japanese conversation——Is Harmony restriction?[1]

Yuka SHIGEMITSU

1. Introduction

Harmony is a concept which is often used to characterize Japanese culture. We associate harmony with peace, no dissension, absolutely no conflict, group conformity and orderliness. According to E. T. Hall (1987), harmony refers to the quality of human relationships and involves cooperation, trust sharing and warmth, based on a caring attitude toward others. He also says that a strong desire to maintain harmony characterizes the Japanese.

This paper presents what mechanisms work to maintain harmony in Japanese conversation. As far as conversation is concerned, there actually is a strong tendency to strive for harmony among the pariticipants. It is always anticipated that there should be restricted communicative rules to keep harmony and Japanese follow them automatically. These restricted communicative rules are associated with "discernment" or "Wakimae", discussed by Hill et at. (1986) and Ide (1992). They define wakimae as socially-agreed-upon rules which apply to both verbal and non-verbal behavior, that is, "conforming to the expected norms." Besides the linguistic forms of politeness such as use of formal forms as honorifics, address terms, speech formulas, we might have mechanisms which are expected to conform socially-agreed-upon rules in conversation.
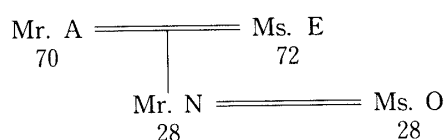
2. Data

The data was collected at the dinner table of four families whom I visited from 1987 to 1988. Any of the subjects were my relatives, except for one unexpected visitor. They were all Japanese. Participants chatted while eating and drinking.
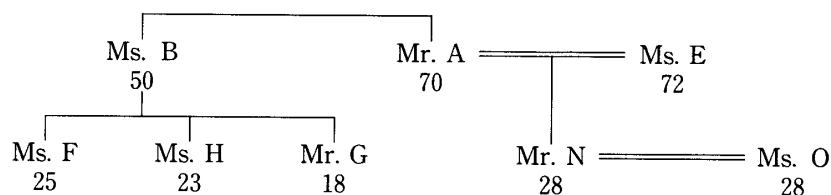
The diagram 1 shows the family tree of the participants. The numbers below each name indicate their ages. A double line shows that they are a married couple. A single line shows that they are brothers and sisters. A vertical dotted line shows that that person is not a relative but is a friend of a participant. All of these situations involved family reunions but participants were not necessarily members of the same household, i.e. they did not all live together. 'Family A' indicates that the conversation was recorded at Mr. A's house.

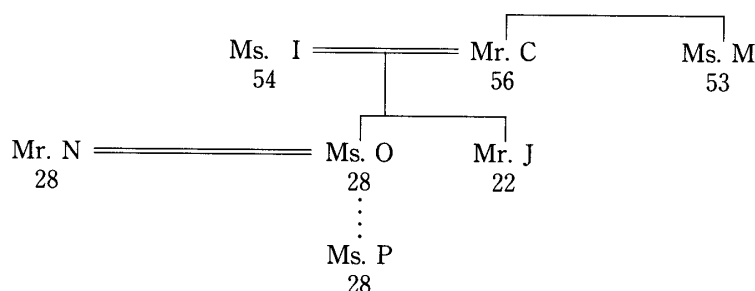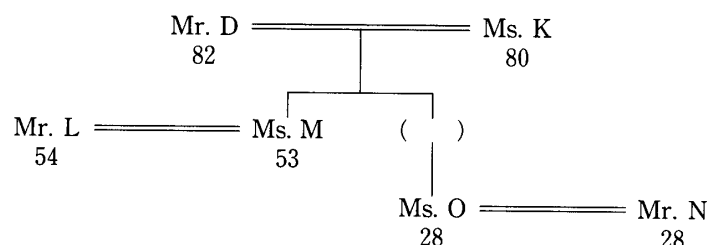[Diagram 1 : Family tree of the participants]

Family A

```
        Mr. A ========== Ms. E
         70       |        72
                  |
              Mr. N ========== Ms. O
               28               28
```

Family B

```
                    ┌───────────────────┐
              Ms. B              Mr. A ════╤════ Ms. E
               50                 70       │      72
        ┌───────┼───────┐                  │
    Ms. F    Ms. H    Mr. G            Mr. N ════════ Ms. O
     25       23       18              28               28
```

Family C

```
                              ┌──────────────────┐
             Ms. I ════╤════ Mr. C           Ms. M
              54       │      56               53
                 ┌─────┴─────┐
   Mr. N ════════ Ms. O   Mr. J
    28             28       22
                   ⋮
                 Ms. P
                  28
```

Family D

```
              Mr. D ════╤════ Ms. K
               82       │      80
              ┌─────────┴─────┐
   Mr. L ════ Ms. M        (   )
    54         53             │
                          Ms. O ════════ Mr. N
                           28               28
```

The conversations were 'naturally recorded', that is, unbeknownst to the participants. I made a recording of one-hour for each family, then transcribed the recordings for analysis. I used the first 30 minutes for analysis in this study. This is because all of the first half of each recording contains a similar situation in which participants were taking their seats and starting to eat.
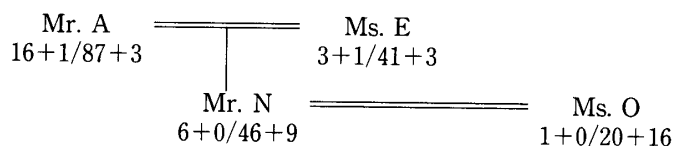
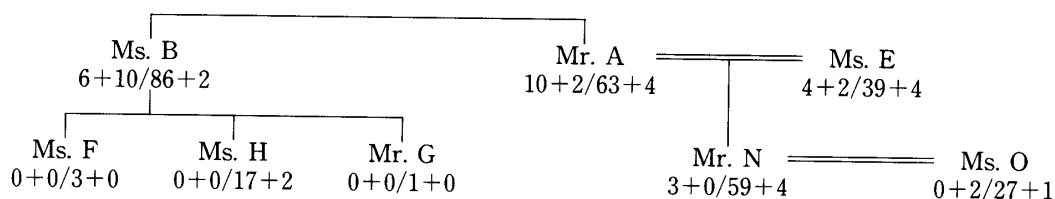## 3. Data Analysis discussion

3.1. Data Analysis

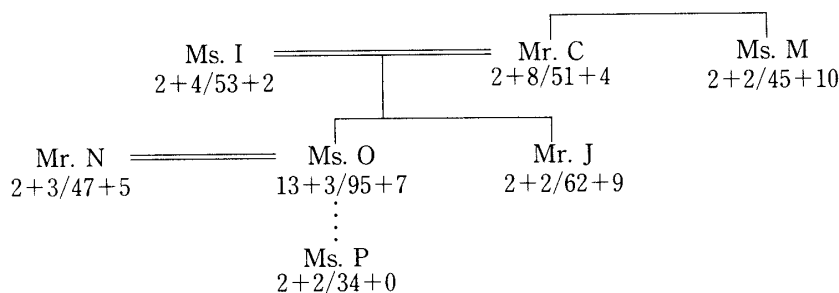I counted the number of topics and utterances (Diagram 2).

[Diagram 2]

Family A

```
         Mr. A ════╤════ Ms. E
      16+1/87+3    │     3+1/41+3
              Mr. N ════════ Ms. O
            6+0/46+9        1+0/20+16
```
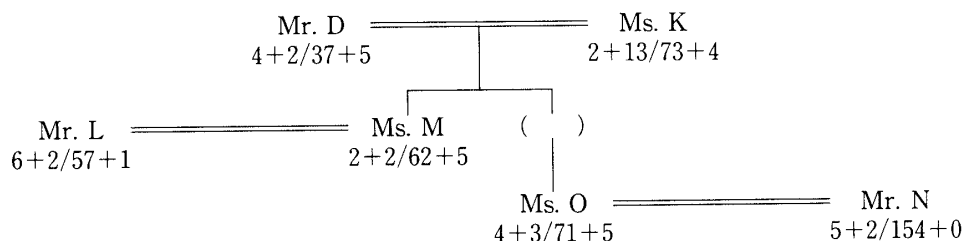
Family B

```
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
              Ms. B                  Mr. A ════╤════ Ms. E
            6+10/86+2               10+2/63+4  │   4+2/39+4
        ┌───────┼───────┐                      │
    Ms. F    Ms. H    Mr. G               Mr. N ════════ Ms. O
   0+0/3+0  0+0/17+2  0+0/1+0           3+0/59+4        0+2/27+1
```

Family C

```
                              ┌─────────────┐
        Ms. I ══════════════ Mr. C       Ms. M
       2+4/53+2              2+8/51+4    2+2/45+10
                        │
                   ┌────┴
        Mr. N ════════════ Ms. O        Mr. J
       2+3/47+5            13+3/95+7    2+2/62+9
                          ⋮
                        Ms. P
                       2+2/34+0
```

Family D

```
                        Mr. D ══════════════ Ms. K
                       4+2/37+5             2+13/73+4
                                    │
                               ┌────┴───┐
        Mr. L ══════════════ Ms. M     (   )
       6+2/57+1             2+2/62+5     │
                                     Ms. O ══════════════ Mr. N
                                    4+3/71+5             5+2/154+0
```

The numbers listed below each name are as follows:

(i)   To the left of the slash:

Numbers of new topics raised by the person indicated

+off-topic-related inserted utterances

(ii)   To the right of the slash:

all utterances+back channelling which can be heard on the tapes.

When a topic was totally different from the previous one, I counted it as an identified topic. Most of the topics were raised after a pause of several seconds by a given participant, so I could identify who raised what new topic.[2]

There are some turns which do not relate to the immediate or previous topic. While talking about a topic, there were insertions, for example an utterance saying 'Keki tabe nai? (Try this cake)' or a couple of inserted turns as 'Denwa (Telephone)' 'Ore ga deru (I'll get it)'. Looking at the data, I found that those who initiated this type of insertion were related to the participants. These interruptions were not topics, however, these were expressions used in order to fill a long pause or they sometimes indicated the end of the immediate topic, other participants thus responding with a couple of turns. Thus I indicate the number of such utterances with '+'.

One turn is counted as one utterance. Numbers of back channeling 'Un', 'Ee', 'So' which can be heard in the recording are indicated after '+' to the right of the slash. They are literally equivalent to 'uh-huh' in English.

3.2. One-way communication

It was found that in each family one or two people spoke more than all of the other participants. In Family A, Mr. A was the main speaker. 16 of 26 topics were initiated by Mr. A. Each of his utterances were longer than the others. In Family B, Ms. B and her brother, Mr. A were the main speakers.

Both in Family A and B, when each Mr. A and Ms. B left the room, long pauses tended to occur. Chart 1 is the flow of topic raiser and pauses between them after Mr. A abandoned his speakership in Family A. Chart 2 is the flow of conversation in Family B after Ms. B left the area.

[Chart 1 : Family A—Topic 21-23]

```
    |
21: Ms. E's tea serving
    |
  (4 seconds pause)
    |
22: Ms. E's topic raising
    |
  (17 seconds pause)
    |
23: Ms. O's topic raising
    |
24: Mr. N's topic raising
    |
```

[Chart 2 : Family B—Topic 28-32]

```
    |
28: Mr. A's topic raising (59 seconds)
    |
29: Ms. B's serving food (Then she left the area)
    |
  (41 seconds pause)
    |
30: Mr. A's topic raising (15 seconds)
    |
  (Ms. B returned.)
31: Ms. B's topic rasing (27 seconds)
    |
32: Ms. O informed that somenoe at the door.
    (Ms. B left)
    |
  (8 seconds pause)
```

Absence of the fixed speaker made the participants a bit nervous because they felt they must choose a new speaker among themselves in order to prevent pauses. From this, it is assumed that Mr. A in Family A and Ms. B in Family B played pivotal speaker's roles. That is, it suggests that the communication is inclined to be a 'one-way' communication from the fixed speaker.

Family C and D also have main speakers, although they show different types of participation compared with conversations in Family A and B. Ms. O talked a great deal in Family C. In family D, Mr. N's utterances were the most numerous compared with other participants. It can be said that each situation required at least one main speaker. Consequently it is implied that Japanese conversation is inclined to be one-way communication.

3.3. Pivotal participants

First, let us consider how the pivotal participants are determined in each situation. Being 'older', 'a more central figure', are primary requirements for being a pivotal speaker in a conversation. These two requirements influence the personal relationship so much that the conversation participants behave accordingly. Moreover, 'being male' also affects the

opportunity to speak.

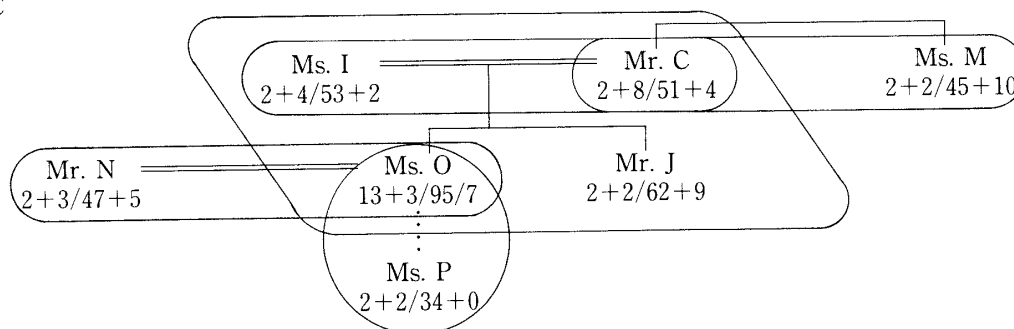### 3.3.1. Factors for being Pivotal participants: 'Elder'

One definite factor of being a pivotal participant is that 'being the older'. Analysis indicates that the older participants will tend to get such a pivotal speaker's role. Both Mr. A in Family A and Ms. B in Family B are of the older generation. Mr. A is the oldest member of Family A and B. Ms. B is not the oldest but she is a member of the elder generation.

3.3.2. Factors for being Pivotal participants: 'Central in in-group'

There is another requirement for assuming the role of the pivotal speaker. Analysis also indicates that the person who has a close relationship to family members present will talk a great deal. Consider Ms. O who talked a great deal in Family C (Diagram 3). The circles indicate the closer relationship among participants. Ms. O is the central figure of the participants, i.e. a member of the in-group circle.[3] Although, she is of the younger generation in the conversation, she knows all other participants well. So she can relax in the situation. Since elder people were not always present where conversation took place, Ms. O was the most appropriate participant to take the speaker's role.

[Diagram 3]
Family C

In Family C, assuming that members of the older generation get speaker's role in conversation, Mr. C, Ms. I or Ms. M of the older generation were supposed to be the main speakers in the family. But they did not take the role for the following reasons. They often left the conversation area to assist in the on-going preparation of the meal. It is customary that at a Japanese meal, especially a traditional dinner with guests, the hostess continually leaves the table to serve new dishes one after another during the meal. In this study, Ms. I often stayed in the kitchen while others were eating and Ms. M, her sister-in-law, often went to the kitchen in order to help. Mr. C left the conversation area during the first part of the recording because he was busy with his own personal (non-culinary) things but at times went to kitchen to help his wife. While Ms. O's friend, Ms. P visited her unexpectedly, Mr. C left the conversation area.[4]

In Family B, while Ms. B and Mr. A left the room, at first no one volunteered to take the speaker's part and there was silence. In the meantime, Mr. N, Ms. O, a couple, and also Ms. H remained there. Three participants now received a new role and a new

dynamic was created. They were trying to offer some new topics. During their attempt, silence occurred several times and it was difficult to bring up new topics because they were not taken up. Mr. N became a speaker because he is the husband of Ms. O and a cousin of Ms. H, that is, he is related closer to both speakers. Among three, he is more 'in' and 'older'. Ms. O and Ms. H met for the first time at this get-together. Ms. O felt more relaxed because her husband became a speaker and he is closer to her than the others and so she began to participate more often. Later, when Ms. B returned, Ms. B again became the center of the new relationship and again Ms. O was distanced to a lesser position in the group. Then Ms. O's participation decreased.

Mr. A in Family A, as a husband and a father, is also at the center of the primary in-group circle. Ms. B in Family B is central among the participants. Therefore, we may conclude that the more centrally a person is placed, the greater their chance will be of becoming the pivotal speaker.

3.3.3. Factors of being the pivotal speaker : 'Male'

Now, I need to make comment regarding Family D. Although, Mr. N is not older and he is not placed in a central position, his number of utterances were the most numerous in the conversation. One reason is that he never left the dinner table during the whole time the conversation took place, while other participants often left because of ongoing preparations. But the main reason is that not only did he initiate new topics but he was also directly addressed. His participation can be explained due to gender differences in the communicative setting. As for Family D, males seem to dominate the conversation compared to the female. Mr. N is a relatively new family member and other members are trying to make him feel relaxed. This demonstrates his relatively favored social status in the family. Consider Ms. O in Family A. She is also a new member but she did not speak quite so often. She was seldom spoken to. She was a passive listener. Back-channelling, she was showing that she was attentive. The male/female difference influences the opportunity to talk. We cannot say that Mr. N is a pivotal speaker or controller, but he was given as many chances to talk as Mr. D and Mr. L.

To further comment, I also found that there were other male/female differences in participation. Female utterances consist of such phrases 'Would you like another cup of tea,' or 'Did you try this nice orange? If you do not want it, we have some cake.' Women are conscious about how they should treat others or how they behave. These are shown with '+' in the diagram 2. Ms. K's utterances in Family D and some of Ms. B's in Family B consist of this type of phrasing.

3.4. Influential factors

We see that 'elder' 'central in in-group' and 'male' are influential factors of being pivotal speaker. Among these factors, being elder is more influential compared with other two. In Family C, in spite of taking the pivotal speaker's role, Ms. O exhibited different types of participation, as compared with Mr. A in Family A and Ms. B in Family B. Ms. O raised some topics, but she did not develop them by herself. She spoke to other participants to let them talk or she raised simple and short topics to fill the gap before

other speakers started to speak. Young and female, she acted merely as a replacement of the older generation's pivotal role.

Although Ms. O spoke a great deal, she did not positively take the pivotal speaker's role. She behaved just as a proxy for the older generation. She tried not to be a fixed speaker. Consequently, while older people often went out of the room and returned, the relationship of each family member often changed and the dynamics continually changed. Therefore, the speaker and the listeners exchanged roles often. As a result, silence easily occurred. There were 18 pauses in a 30-minute recording. One pause averaged 32.7 seconds. It is because proxy speaker waited for the older start to speak. Therefore, being older is the most influential factor for being a pivotal speaker.

3.5. Other participants

Once a pivotal speaker is determined, it can be said that others remain as passive speakers based on the following observations. First, the conversation is inclined to be one-way from fixed speakers to others who remain as a passive listener. Second, when the main speakers abandon their speakership, long pauses tend to occur. It is because others are still possessing their passive speakership and take some time to select new speakers among themselves. Then they start new relationship in the new dynamics.

In other words, those who will be speakers control the situation and those who are controlled are passive listeners. Hence, it is said that in a Japanese conversation, participants are classified into two groups: those who will be speakers and those who will be passive listeners. Those who control the situation will be the speakers and listeners are those who are controlled. In a way, Ms. K in Family D was a controller of the dinner table situation in which eating might be given priority to talking.

4. Restriction for controller and the controlled

The following is a summary of restrictiveness for the fixed speaker and the listeners based on the observation of the data. Even if a person is reticent or tired and reluctant to speak, once he is forced into the position of being a speaker, he is also forced to become a controller. I refer to this as 'restriction'. On the contrary, even if a person in the controlled position wants to talk or has something to talk about, he/she must wait until the opportunity to talk will be given.

4.1. Speaker (Controller):

(1) Raises a topic and develops it by himself/herself.

The controller controls the situation and he/she has a responsibility to raise a topic and develops it by himself/herself.

(2) Repairs the conversation break down.

If there is a long pause, he/she has responsibility to fill the gap. He/she has to seek a new topic or ask questions to the passive listeners in order to restart the conversation. Or, if the conversation gets off the topic and wanders, he or she decides whether to repair it or leave it to the spontaneous flow.

(3) Decides whether to give other participant right to talk.

Mainly the speaker speaks. But he/she has right to make others speak. Usually, he/she asks questions to one of passive listeners without permission. However, the controller still controls the flow of conversation so the passive controlled participants talk under control. If he/she wants to speak more, he/she always observes whether he/she is permitted to continue to talk.

(4) Speaks for other participants.

When some passive listener has something to talk about, the main speaker can speak for him/her. It is quite common that a mother speaks for her little children. Same things happen if the controller knows what a passive listener is going to talk, he/she gives the opportunity.[5]

(5) If he/she missed some part of another participant's remarks, he/she will ask them to repeat the remarks.

After he/she returns to the conversation area, the main speaker can say 'What were you talking about?' On the contrary, after the passive controlled participants returns, they try to figure out what is going on without asking a question. If they can not grasp it, they leave it. After they have opportunity to ask, they can ask what was going on.

(6) He/she is in position to give information.

He/she is in position to give information. Even if they have few, they try to find topics or information to give others.

4.2. Listener (People who are Controlled):

(1) Waits to talk only when the opportunity to talk is offered.
They will not be a starter of conversation. They wait for the opportunity to talk.

(2) Raises the topics but seldom develops them by himself/herself.

Although the topics can be raised by the cotrolled person, it is usually the pivotal speaker who continues to speak about them. That he/she has a conversation to himself or herself is considered to be impolite. So the controlled, the weak in the society, try not to hold their speakership.

(3) If he/she finds the conversation going off the topic, first he/she has to participate in the breaking down situation.

Breaking down situations include such as sudden changes, interruptions, overlapping or long pauses. If there are breaking down situations, the pivotal speaker has a responsibility to repair them. If the controlled participants try to repair or if he/she points out the breaking down, it could be considered that the controlled blame the controller incapacity as a controller, and then that is impolite.

(4) Waits for opportunities to raise a topic by himself/herself.

There is explicit moment that no one gets speakership. It is judged from a couple of turns with long pause (averaged 30 seconds or more). In such a moment, the controlled participants are freed from control and get speakership without permission but with reserve.

(5) What he/she wants to say can be said by the fixed controller.

The controller can speak for him/her. So even he/she asked to answer directly from other participants, he/she leaves it to the controller.

(6) Controlled participants are in position of being given information.

Usually, the controlled person feels more secure not speaking.

(7) For the controlled participants, only socially acceptable interruptions are allowable.

Socially acceptable interruptions are; expressions of gratiude, hospitality, or leaving the conversation area to assist. This shows how the controlled participants are obedient and polite in the society they live. The ability as a member of the society is shown with how much they are polite and obedient instead of how much they have competence and skill.

4.3 The role assignment

These roles will be assigned according to the relative status of each participant. Who is older? Who has more acquaintances? This relative status keeps changing when the dynamics of participants are changing during the conversation. Each participant should measure which position they are in and behave accordingly. Thus harmony among participants and harmony of the situation can be kept.

The more the participant's status vary, the more the role assignment become more restricted. This restrictiveness will be mitigated if the participants are close friends[6] or a nuclear family[7]. Consider the case of Ms. O. Her participation shows that she behaved differently in each Family. She was in a relatively unimportant (or non-central) position in both Families A and B. She seldom talked and raised topics herself. She was a listener in Family A and B because she was more 'outside' there. She was the youngest in Family A and she visited Family B for the first time. In Family C and D, she was somewhat in a central position. And so she talked a great deal. She behaved according to her status in each context rather than according to her personality, quiet or aggressive.

5. Conclusion

This study concerns the nature of family conversations. We also experience role assignment in other situations. For example, in a classroom situation, students are reluctant to discuss with each other even when the teacher encourages it. Also, they are afraid of asking questions to the teacher during class. It can be said that students are in a controlled position. In a sense, they keep the conversation restriction rule automatically. Consider another example. Japanese companies require their new employees to go through a series of training sessions that often run for more than a month. During the training sessions, such information as general operations of the company, personal health management, and etiquette in the business world are taught. But the practice for persuasion is not included in the course because freshman employees are the youngest in the company and they are not in a position to persuade.

To conclude, I believe, therefore, that an ad hoc hierarchy of participants is automatically generated in each situation. Each participant estimates his/her position mainly according to the traditional Japanese social structure. Each participant takes age and the other members' roles in the society's power structure into consideration. Then he/she behaves accordingly. This is done because Japanese one-way communication creates personal

security both for the speaker or the listener. And this one-way communication creates personal security for both listeners and speakers for there is no doubt as to when or how to communicate in this type of context. Again participants are classified into two groups: those who "control" the conversation and those who are "controlled". Both members have social rules which they must follow. This, then, ultimately creates the harmony we have seen at work in this study.

NOTES

1) This study is based on the presentation 'Harmony: Is this restriction?' at 4th International Pragmatics Conference in Kobe, in July 1993.

2) Tannen (1984) says that who raised a topic turned out to be exceedingly complex in her analysis of English conversation. However, nature of Japanese does not show such complexity.

3) In-group/out-group deixis is a useful term to explain Japanese social structure. These circles are tentatively drawn according to the close relationship of participants, such as a husband and a wife, brothers and sisters, parents and children, or friends.

4) Ms. P is Ms. O's friend at school. After Ms. P joined the conversation, the primary communicative ingroup circle was created by Ms. P and Ms. O. Mr. C was put outside of the circle. It might be said hat he left the conversation area in order to encourage them to talk intimately.

5) The case that the main speaker speaks for a passive listener can be seen when the participants are more than two.

6) In Japan, same age and common background may be a prior determinant to be the same status.

7) Traditionally, in-laws are considered to be more outside compared with the blood-related.

References

Hall, Edward T. (1987) *Hidden Differences: Doing business with the Japanese.* New York: Doubleday.
Hill, B., S. Ide, S. Ikuta, A. Kawasaki and T. Ogino. (1986) "Universals of Linguistic Politeness: Quantitative Evidence from Japanese and American English." *Journal of Pragmatics* 10, 347-371.
Ide, S. (1992) "On the Notion of *Wakimae*: Toward an Integrated Framework of Linguistic Politeness." *Kotoba no Mosaic.* Eds. by S. Ide et al. Tokyo: Mejiro Linguistic Society, 298-305.
Tannen, D. (1984) *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk among Friends.* NJ: Ablex.